

to transport medicines to communities across damaged roads and bridges. "Clean water has been scarce in many areas, and people lack fuel to boil dirty water," says Daniel Epstein, press officer for PAHO. Many parents aren't aware of the danger of severe dehydration, which can kill children quickly, he says. "Chronic dysentery doesn't grab the headlines, but it is responsible for far more loss of life [than other illnesses in the region after the storm]," says Matthew Chico, regional specialist for Latin America and the Caribbean for the American Red Cross. To supply drinking water plants, the agency has already sent 20,000 pounds of purifying chemicals, with another 20,000 pounds on the way and a third shipment of 20,000 pounds planned. The American Red Cross has also distributed chlorine and iodine tablets to purify water.

Mitch caused extraordinary crop losses throughout the region. Nearly 70% of Honduran crops were ruined, according to the U.S. Embassy. Grain fields and the shrimp industry were devastated. The fourth largest banana producer in the world, Honduras lost 90% of its banana

crop. In Guatemala, 95% of the nation's banana crop was reported destroyed, plus 25–60% of the corn, bean, coffee, and sugar crops. These effects are especially harmful because so many in Central America rely on farming for jobs. For example, in Honduras, about 54% of the workforce is employed in agriculture.

Extensive logging and burning of forests contributed to massive flooding during Mitch, according to the Rainforest Alliance, an international conservation organization. Central America has lost two-thirds of its forests to logging, agriculture, fires, and development, most of it over the past 30 years. About 75% of the land in Central America is hilly or mountainous. Farmers have routinely planted crops along



**The sound and the fury.** Hurricane Mitch wreaked havoc on the environment and on the lives of people living in its path in Central America.

open slopes, which do not hold the soil as well as wooded areas during heavy rains. In Nicaragua, a tragic incident illustrated a disastrous use of the land. A volcano called *Casita*, or "Little House," was home to subsistence farmers settled there by the government. Farmers had cleared trees to plant crops on the volcano's slope. But after a week of rain during Mitch, one side of the volcano collapsed, burying an estimated 2,000 people in mud. In recent years, farmers and ranchers have purposely set fires, mistakenly believing that burning will improve the soil. To compound the problem, in the first half of 1998 a regionwide drought spread wildfires, burning about 3 million acres.

Mitch overshadowed another tragic natural disaster in the Caribbean this year—Hurricane Georges's rampage across the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, and other nations in September 1998. Georges crushed important banana plantations, coffee crops, and sugarcane fields. In the Dominican Republic, 150,000 people were displaced by the storm. In Saint Kitts–Nevis, 25% of the homes were destroyed, and 50% of the sugar harvest lost. "Georges caused comparable crop losses to Mitch," says Chico. "The effects of Georges were just as great, particularly in the Dominican Republic. But when Mitch entered the scene, Georges was forgotten."

Despite the devastation in Central America, national governments and the international community are making a concerted effort to clean up the damage and to plan redevelopment. And on the local level "there is a strong community effort," says Ann Stingle, international press officer for the American Red Cross, who visited the region in early November. "People are working to help themselves."

### Federal Food Safety Update

On 8 January 1999, Morris E. Potter was named director of the National Food Safety Initiative. As initiative director, Potter will oversee the food safety activities of the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, expand and improve the FDA's food-related inspection and surveillance systems, enhance FDA collaborations with other government agencies in responding to foodborne illness outbreaks, institute additional prevention controls and strategies, and conduct nationwide public education campaigns.

Potter most recently served as assistant director for foodborne diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and acted as CDC liaison to the National Food Safety Initiative. Potter has also served as director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Center for Foodborne Disease Surveillance, and has worked in various veterinary epidemiologist positions in a number of state, federal, and foreign food safety programs, including those of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Illinois Department of Public Health. Potter has served on four National Academy of Sciences panels and on the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods.

In support of the National Food Safety Initiative, the FDA recently established a new Web site, located at <http://www.foodsafety.gov>, that offers information and resources for consumers, food industry workers, and educators. The Reporting Illnesses & Product Complaints link leads

consumers to information on whom to contact in the event of various food-related health complaints. The Consumer Advice link accesses information on special topics in food-related health, such as food safety for expectant mothers and senior citizens, and guidelines for handling specific foods such as eggs and seafood. The Industry Assistance link offers a gateway to numerous regulatory Web sites, such as the EPA Office of Pesticide Programs and the CDC's Top 20 Hazardous Substances list. The Kids, Teens, & Educators link brings up educational information geared toward young people, as well as lesson plans and other resources for teachers who want to inform their students about food risks.

The Foodborne Pathogens link offers fact sheets on specific illnesses such as listeriosis, and links to government sites with information on various foodborne organisms. Other links on the home page access recent safety alerts, background information on the initiative, and Web sites for other state and federal government agencies.

